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ABSTRACT

This case study using pseudonyms was prepared for class discussion in training teachers and administrators who have some responsibility for building-level policy. Big Mountain is a well-established, comprehensive high school that served over 1,450 students in grades 10-12. Considerable autonomy is given to teachers, who have control their teaching and classrooms. Staff opinion about their involvement or lack thereof in decision making is mixed. Some question how much influence their input has and feel that the school's management is too "top down," despite the principal's espoused "bottom up" philosophy. Several departments are restructuring their curriculum through districtwide curriculum committees. Successful modifications in these departments are one reason the Language Arts department was told to reform its curriculum. Because of decisions to cut the department's electives and adopt a year-long, mandatory core curriculum, many teachers are anxious about losing latitude in what they teach. Case teaching notes that were prepared to assist instructors in using the Blue Mountain case in classroom discussion or in-service activities are provided. (EJS)

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Final Deliverable

CHANGES AT BIG MOUNTAIN HIGH SCHOOL

A Teaching Case
by
BetsAnn Smith
and
Karen Seashore Louis

October 15, 1990

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CHANGES AT BIG MOUNTAIN HIGH SCHOOL[1]

Introduction

Big Mountain High School's day begins at 8:00, but students and teachers have been arriving since 7:00. Many students drive and jockey for parking, but a large number arrive in buses; some travel close to thirty miles or more in this largely rural district. Since the school does not use homerooms most students mill around in the halls and outside the school until the first bell rings. Teachers tutor students or chat in their department offices. The hunting season opening is the topic of conversations in hallways, offices and classrooms. During the next few weeks students, teachers and even the principal are likely to take a few days off from school in order to hunt with fathers or friends. These absences, embedded in regional custom, are overlooked.

In spite of their fondness for hunting stories, many staff members in the Language Arts department have other issues on their minds. This week three teachers and the department chair will spend a day trying to reach agreement on a new curriculum for the junior class. Currently, juniors choose among electives that mesh with the school's basic, standard and honors tracks. This year, however, the administration has decided that too many students are getting by with insufficient learning. Local concerns about program rigor have been reinforced by an educationally active governor and new state curriculum mandates -- Brad Vogel, the principal, feels that Big Mountain staff should reform the curriculum so that changes are not imposed on them. Language Arts was picked as a "test site" for change.

Reaching agreement on a new Language Arts curriculum has not been easy, however, and has aggravated pedagogical and personal differences between the staff. Teachers at Big Mountain are used to being able to design and teach their courses the way that they want to, and the current curriculum has developed around these individual preferences. Many describe the teachers as reflecting the strong local culture of "rugged individualism." The current conflicts remain largely below the surface.

An Overview of Big Mountain

Big Mountain is a well established comprehensive high school that serves over 1450 students in grades 10-12. The only high school in its county, it is one of the largest high schools in the state but is located in an area known for its wilderness and beauty. Attachment to the area and outdoor life runs strong amongst the students and staff.
When a warm and sunny day arrives there is a palpable feeling in the hallways of people wanting to be out and about. Until 3:00, however, students and staff go about the day in an orderly

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[1] This case was prepared for class discussion by BetsAnn Smith and Karen Seashore Louis, Department of Educational Policy and Administration, University of Minnesota. All names are pseudonyms, and the case is not intended to illustrate good or bad management. Preparation was supported by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Effective Secondary Schools, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Grant No. G-008690007). The case does not necessarily reflect the views of either of the supporting agencies.

fashion, and most are happy to be at the school.

Students at Big Mountain come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Many families have been hit hard by retrenchment in the timber industry and farming, but the increasing number of professional couples do well in the area's booming tourist economy. Forty percent of the students go on to attend 4 year colleges, and 20 percent go on to 2 year college--a high rate for a rural setting. For non-college bound students, Big Mountain has a vocational program, portions of which operate in a separate building about three miles from the main campus.

Historically, the student (and teacher) population has been stable. More recently, teachers have reported a greater degree of student turnover from the "new drop out syndrome," where middle class and professional families who are attracted to the area for a lower-key life become disenchanted with the lower incomes and rural lifestyle and move back to a more urban setting. This theme of boom and bust pops up quite regularly in discussions. Timber and farming are busting, real estate, tourism, and arty bistro/galleries are booming.

Despite the somewhat volatile local economy, Big Mountain's ability to support both a generous physical plant (a new wing and a performing arts annex have recently been added) and a broad range of learning opportunities is noteworthy. Community support for education is very strong and visitors are quickly told of the town's record for approving annual tax levies. Other amenities, such as a strong sports program, several computer labs, drama club, a competitive debating society, a career information center, and national and foreign travel opportunities make Big Mountain to seem more like an affluent suburban high school than its rural counterparts. Teachers in the math and science departments have received a number of awards, of which the school is very proud.

Since 1985 a state property tax freeze has made some budget cuts have been necessary. On the other hand, teachers salaries remain the highest in the state, and the majority of teachers report a high degree of satisfaction with their working conditions. When the rare openings occur for teaching positions, the applicant pools are large and well qualified. Big Mountain has recently been receiving some national attention for its apparently successful efforts to foster "school-based management."

Brad Vogel has been principal at Big Mountain for the past 15 years. A dedicated coach, Vogel is known for his candid and efficient style, and for being fair, but he is also considered by many to be gruff and impersonal. Recently, Vogel agreed to a survey evaluation of his performance by the staff. Since receiving feedback that many staff members felt he was unapproachable and that his time was not well accounted for, Vogel has been trying to be less aloof and more flexible with the staff, although he still maintains a stern demeanor with students. Along with Vogel there is an assistant principal who deals with discipline and scheduling, and another for student activities. Additionally, there are four guidance counsellors. Most routine guidance is handled by teachers, each of whom has around fifteen students whose course selections they review twice each year.

Most staff acknowledge that Vogel gives departments considerable autonomy and authority as to how they allocate their budget, distribute teaching assignments, and design their curriculum and instruction. This is part of Vogel's "bottom up" philosophy of allowing decisions directly affecting teachers and students to be made by the most involved and experienced staff.

A "bottom up" philosophy of school management is also espoused by the districts new Superintendent. Four years ago the district's 11 member school board conducted a search for a new superintendent. The Board looked for someone who was charismatic, had a reputation for getting things done, and was not afraid to share decisions or to make decisions that no one else could. Their choice was Bob Carpenter, a former area native who returned from California to begin his fourth superintendency.

Respect and regard for Carpenter runs high among the high schools staff. In fact, Carpenter is mentioned by the teachers more often than Vogel when prospective changes are being discussed. He is often present at the high school, and it is not unusual for him to visit classrooms and talk to teachers. He recruits teachers for district committees or projects directly, and is also known for giving teachers appointments to hear their ideas for new courses or programs, even if Vogel has not been immediately supportive. He also has a standing invitation for teachers to join him at a local breakfast shop one morning a week. Many thought Carpenter would leave at the end of this year, (his youngest child had graduated), but he has recently signed a new three year contract.

The School Organization: Who Decides What?

The professional life of Big Mountain teachers revolves around departments, and there is little to no interdisciplinary interaction among the staff. Department chairs, who are appointed by the principal after consultation with the department, serve an open ended term, and receive one extra planning period and an annual stipend. In some departments seniority plays a large role in who becomes chair and many of the chairs have been in their positions for a dozen years or more. The Science department prefers to occasionally rotate its chairs. The chairs (all men) play a significant administrative role and enjoy a considerable amount of authority with their staffs in terms of budgeting, teaching assignments and other departmental decisions. They also interview prospective teachers, sometimes jointly with the principal, sometimes separately. Final decision on who is hired rests with the principal, but the chairs feel that their recommendations are respected.

All department chairs and the three administrators meet about every three weeks for information sharing and decision making. At these meetings chairs act as an information pipe line between their staffs and the building administration. For example, many teachers were upset with the school's suspension policy, which barred students from the building for a day. The teachers were bothered by students "who returned with ski goggle marks bragging about what fun they had," and complained to their chairs that the policy was flawed. Eventually, the complaints caused the administration to implement in-school suspension. This administrative group of principals and department chairs is seen by most staff as the school's central decision making body, although one chair remarked that they, (the chairs), often leave the meeting with ambiguous feelings about what has actually been accomplished. Faculty meetings, in contrast, are typically short: "If you're late, you've missed it." Five to ten minutes is the average meeting length and time is spent in straight forward information sharing from Vogel to the staff.

Big Mountain also gives considerable autonomy to teachers, who control their teaching and their classroom, while departments control curriculum and the administration maintains authority over school policies and procedures. Staff opinion over their involvement or lack of involvement in school decision making is very mixed. Some feel that the current system is the wisest:

> There are all kinds of opinions in this school, and we could have a real mess if we got into that stuff -- feelings, disagreements,

> complaining, all that kind of thing. [This system] keeps all that stuff to a minimum.
>
> This is an excellent school to work in. Why? For one, it is pretty structured. You know where you stand; you know what the rules are.

Many on the staff are satisfied if they are allowed to have input, but question how much influence their input really has.

> We have input, but the final decision will go to the principal. It doesn't make a whole lot of difference what our input is in the end. He's got his mind made up from the start.
>
> You can change things here. It just takes a long time. But if you keep coming back about something over a period of time, you can get stuff to happen.
>
> You can make waves here; it's just nothing comes out of it. It never gets beyond a certain point. The only way you can get beyond a certain point is to either file a grievance, or sometimes you can go to the superintendent directly.

A smaller number of teachers are quite unhappy with the way decisions are made and with the level of discussion that occurs between teachers. They feel that the culture of the school is too individualistic, too impersonal, and too "top down," despite the espoused "bottom up" philosophy. Many, but not all, of the teachers in this group are women. Reception to their desire for a more personal and collaborative environment has met with guarded support, but also derision:

> We have people here who want to talk about their feelings. They want to sit around and talk and share lives; tell us about their aunt's surgery, you name it.

Concern over how upcoming decisions might be made has prompted interest in reestablishing a faculty advisory committee. It would not be the first time Big Mountain had such a group. An advisory was attempted a few years earlier but was disbanded:

> [Members] went in and the administration read you the Board minutes and asked if you had any questions. You brought up the concerns that teachers had brought to you and usually they responded, "we'll look it" or "that's not a problem," or "that's not happening", and then the meeting ends. And then the next month you meet and you go through the same thing again. So, many were so frustrated with it that we got rid of it. Now, some say we ought to try it again.

Some staff argue that, even when they don't like decisions that are made, it is better to have Vogel in charge:

> For a few years Vogel was trying to run all decisions by committee: attendance, policies, etc, and he finally had to back up and say "I'll make those decisions". And when he does make those decisions we respect them.

However, at the most recent faculty meeting, Vogel announced that a vote would be taken on whether to reinstate the advisory. He appointed a teacher to run the meeting, and promptly left the room. A large showing of hands voted against bringing the advisory back, but since a near equal showing expressed support it was approved.

The Curriculum Challenge

Overall, discussions about decision making are not half as popular among the staff as discussions about curriculum. Several departments are involved in reviewing their curriculum through district wide curriculum committees emphasizing continuity across grades. While there is much discussion of curriculum, there is little discussion of instruction and the majority of classes are taught in a traditional lecture/discussion format with time left at the end of class for students to begin homework. Still, there is considerable variation in the content and teaching methods of courses belonging to the different tracks:

> Everything is different about how I teach my basic and my standard classes. In basics things move slower, the material is different, and we work more on basic communication skills. I have 30 kids in my basics class and its hard. In my standard class I have 25. We do more writing, more analytic work.
>
> Last year my AP class had 28 kids in it. I told [the administration] that unless they could get the number down I was going to teach it like a standard class with less writing. So, they added another section to get it down below 20.

Over the past two to three years the science and math departments have been reconstructing their curriculum to give students options about when to begin a certain level of learning in the hopes of keeping students involved in math and science for an extra semester or two. In this system a chemistry or algebra class often has a mix of tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders. Successful modifications in these departments is one reason why Language Arts was told that it too must reform its curriculum. Specifically, it has been suggested that they abolish electives.

The Chair of the Language Arts department, Chester Gary, has been in his position for over twenty years and sees their situation this way:

> There are kids around here who can play the game and get out of here without a well rounded education in Language Arts. For the top 50-55% kids, you could not give them a better education. But these other kids, they just want to get out and they take the easy way out. Because of the electives they can do that. We need to have classes with content that represents our goals and objectives so our kids our getting what we think they should get. We are the test department in the district to show that these kids can do better.

Several of the low tracked electives at issue have been taught for years by Gary himself.

Although it was known that he was retiring at the end of the year, Gary was appointed by Vogel to lead a group of department teachers in devising a reformed junior year curriculum. A month ago Gary asked for volunteers to form a decision making group which would meet for one day to make the needed changes. Ten of the department's sixteen teachers expressed interest. Gary chose one volunteer and then went and spoke to two teachers *who did not volunteer*. He asked each who they thought would represent the teachers well in the planning process. Each mentioned one teacher and these two were also chosen. On the day of the meeting other teachers will be able to briefly join the group of four during their planning periods, if they wish.

There are known differences of opinion within the department. Gary wants to abolish semester electives and design a year long core program, but other teachers are worried about losing latitude and choices in what they teach and how. Some teachers are strongly opposed to the adoption of a year long mandatory core curriculum:

> We tried this ten years ago. We just moved the basics in with the standards. It didn't work.

Teachers are also anxious about the effects the curriculum revision process may have on staff relations within the department:

> There is both a negative and positive view on all of this. If the administration were to just walk in with a scalpel and say, "this will be taught, and this will be taught and you teachers pick a textbook" then we could all just hate the administration. If the English teachers have to work with one another, and if somebody comes out the winner, somebody the loser, it could create some real problems. How will one person respond to another if that person brought forth the motion to do away with the first one's class?

Who will replace Gary as chair is an additional issues on some of the minds of the department staff. Many feel Vogel will choose whomever Gary recommends, leaving teachers interested in applying for chair with concerns about whether open disagreement about curriculum changes might affect their chances.

CASE TEACHING NOTES

Introduction

These notes were prepared to assist instructors who are using the case in class discussion or in-service activities, and not necessarily for distribution to students. The case is intended to be useful both for teachers and administrators who have some responsibility for building level policy.

Instructors or group leaders may wish to select a list of questions to be discussed prior to or at the beginning of the class period where discussion time is limited, or to let them emerge more naturally during discussion. Groups may be assigned to look at a single issue and report back to the class, or the class may treat several issues as a whole. The case may be assigned by itself, or with Appendix A. At least an hour is suggested as a minimum time for discussion and a broad range of questions is to be covered by the group as a whole.

Big Mountain is not an innovative school full of experimental programs. It is, instead, a very recognizable "good" comprehensive high school. This case is intended to foster discussion of some of the most common but often most stubborn dilemmas faced by high school teachers and administrators, namely: how teachers and administrators should be involved in decision-making; how curriculum should be developed; and what roles should teachers, department chairs and administrators play in stimulating change. Depending on the interests of the group, a discussion of what should a "rigorous curriculum" look like, the role of electives versus required courses in the high school curriculum, and the correspondence of the curriculum with the ability tracks could also be stimulated.

Before beginning to address the questions below, the role of different actors should be discussed:

(1) the principal: How would you describe the leadership style of the principal with regard to instruction? teacher professionalism and quality of work life? What are the strengths of his leadership style? The weaknesses?

(2) teachers' needs: The assumption at Big Mountain is that professional teachers need little direction. Teachers, for the most part, are satisfied. Yet, there are some underlying issues, such as "female needs" versus "male needs" among the faculty, and some teacher's preference for greater influence over policy. How good is the quality of work life for teachers at Big Mountain? Where is it weak?

(3) department chairs: Some reformers have pointed to the importance of building up department affiliation and activity as a source of identification and professionalism for teachers. How effective is the department chair role, as currently conceptualized at Big Mountain, in supporting teacher quality of work life and professionalism? How would you like to see it redesigned, if at all?

(3) the superintendent: The superintendent plays an important role in Big Mountain. How does his role affect teachers?

Key Questions

(1) Participatory decision making.

How would you characterize decision making at Big Mountain? Some would describe it as consultative -- would you agree?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of decision making in this school?

Much of the current literature assumes that teachers want more voice in school decision making. Is that the case at Big Mountain?

Decision making at Big Mountain is "zoned" so that administrators make policy decisions, departments make broad curricular decisions and teachers decide about curriculum implementation in the classroom and pedagogical issues. What are the implications of the "zoning" of decisions?

(2) Curriculum decision making in the Language Arts Department.

What are the possible pros and cons for having the Department Chair to lead the decision making team?

Are there alternative ways of organizing this decision process that might work better?

What would a "good decision" look like in this case?

(3) Fear of information and opinion.

Why do you think that the number of teachers on the Language Arts curriculum committee was limited to three? What are the effects of restricting the number of teachers on the Language Arts curriculum team when many more expressed a desire to participate?

Describe the process for changing the Language Arts curriculum. How could this be improved? What are other examples of staff wanting to limit larger decision making groups in this school? Why would this be the case?

How could an environment in which more open discussion about professional disagreements be created?

(4) The Faculty Advisory.

Why did the first faculty advisory committee fail?

What could the administration and the new faculty advisory do to make it work more successfully?

(5) Teacher Autonomy

How does the local community culture of "rugged individualism" affect the functioning of the school? The change process?

What are some possible reasons for why the math and science departments were getting awards at the same time that the Language Arts department was receiving directives to reform?

(6) Strategies for change.

What characteristics of Big Mountain and its staff make change difficult? Which ones help foster change?

How might you go about introducing something new or getting something changed at Big Mountain if you were a teacher? A department chair? the principal? the superintendent?

Discuss "bottom up" decision making at Big Mountain paying attention to its potential as well as to its problems.